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**“I WANNA HAVE MY OWN DAMN DAIRY FARM!”:  
WOMEN FARMERS, LEGIBILITY, AND FEMININITIES  
IN RURAL WISCONSIN, U.S.\***

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ABSTRACT

The number of women farming in the United States continues to climb, even as the number of farms has been relatively stable in recent years. Nevertheless, women often face an uphill battle in asserting themselves as farmers, particularly if they are living and working in communities in which masculinities and femininities have been shaped over time by the gendered symbolic categories of *farmer* and *farm wife*. In light of the discursive power of the title of *farmer* this article examines women's pathways into farming to ask: 1) To what extent do women encounter difficulties in being legible as farmers, and how do they manage these difficulties?; and 2) How do women farmers reshape rural femininity in being recognized as farmers? Drawing on interviews and ethnographic data from 12 Wisconsin women farmers, this article shows that many women farming sustainably and conventionally faced considerable obstacles at the institutional, interactional, and symbolic levels of the gender system as they attempted to be recognized as farmers; managing these difficulties through persistence. Some women contested the gender regime of farming by constructing an alternative rural femininity through insisting on the title of *farmer*, drawing on the symbolism of hegemonic rural femininity and masculinity in the process.

A major U.S. Department of Agriculture court case involving discrimination against women farmers, *Love v. Vilsack*, is coming to a close after nearly 15 years. As an alternative to litigation, women and Hispanic farmers and ranchers who believed they had been discriminated against by the USDA based on gender or race were invited in September 2012 to submit claims to the government agency, which had announced it would provide a settlement of at least \$1.33 billion to eligible farmers (USDA 2012a).<sup>1</sup> Plaintiffs alleged that discrimination had occurred at local

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<sup>1</sup>*Love v. Vilsack* refers to the case in which women farmers alleged discrimination by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Garcia v. Vilsack* is the lawsuit in which Hispanic farmers alleged discrimination by the Department. The claims process administered by the USDA brought together both lawsuits. The settlement of two class action lawsuits involving discrimination against African

USDA offices, where farmers inquired about loan programs but were systematically denied application forms and loans, or experienced other types of discrimination based on their gender or race. Government representatives did not “read” women and racial minorities as farmers. As such, *Love v. Vilsack* centered on the politics of legibility—the ability to be socially recognized and “seen”—at the state level, in this case, at the local offices of an arm of the state. Considering the systematic nature of this discrimination at the local level, we must understand other kinds of obstacles women farmers face in being recognized as farmers in the communities where they live and work.

This article traces women’s pathways into agriculture to understand the importance of gender in being recognized as a farmer. The number of women farmers who are principal operators in the United States continues to climb, increasing by 46 percent from 1997 to 2007 (USDA 1999; USDA 2011a).<sup>2</sup> This change has occurred as the number of farms remains somewhat stable in recent years compared with larger shifts in the past, though the number of small-acreage farms has increased and large-acreage farms have become even larger and more profitable (Hoppe and Banker 2010). Simultaneously consumer demand for organic foods, the number of organic farms, and the popularity of farmers’ markets have increased dramatically (Greene 2013). Farms in the smaller sales class with operators reporting farming as their principal occupation are more likely to adopt organic practices than other operations (Bagi 2013). Despite these structural shifts, women, whether they farm using sustainable or conventional methods, often face an uphill battle in asserting themselves as farmers; particularly if they are living and working in communities in which masculinity and femininity have been shaped over time by the gendered symbolic categories of *farmer* and *farm wife*. An emerging literature has paved the way for analyzing rural masculinity, yet the same cannot be said for femininity. Although gender sociologists with non-rural interests have begun to analyze multiple femininities (e.g., Pyke and Johnson 2003; Schippers 2007), complementing the well-worn path of masculinity studies, little is known about place-based femininities, particularly in rural areas. Analyzing gender as multilevel reveals how discourse and language construct rural femininities and

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Americans and American Indians was announced by the USDA in 2010 (USDA 2012a).

<sup>2</sup>The Census of Agriculture data on women farmers reported here refer to women principal operators, that is, those who run the farm and identify as the main decision-maker (USDA 2012b). In this article the use of “women farmers” falls in line with Brandth (1994:131), and refers to “women who, as active farmers, own or operate a farm alone or together with their spouse.”

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masculinities, those that reinforce hegemonic gender relations as well as those that contest them.

Drawing on a case study of Wisconsin women farmers, this article aims to answer the following questions: 1) To what extent do women encounter difficulties in being legible as farmers, and how do they manage these difficulties? 2) How do women farmers reshape rural femininity to be recognized as farmers? These questions are addressed using data from in-depth interviews and participant observation with 12 Wisconsin women farmers. Findings show that, while women's pathways into farming are diverse, many encountered considerable barriers at the institutional, interactional, and symbolic levels of the gender system as they attempted to be recognized as farmers. Results highlight the importance of the alternative rural femininity of the 'self-identified farmer' in women's efforts to become seen as farmers in this male-dominated field. The practice of alternative rural femininity was shaped by the symbolism of both hegemonic rural femininity as well as masculinity.

## WOMEN FARMERS

Before Carolyn Sachs' groundbreaking 1983 book, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production*, there was little focus on women's farm labor in American rural sociology. Zimmerman (2013) convincingly argued that our conception of women's inclusion in early rural sociological research has been clouded by a linear model of viewing history as increasingly progressive. Sachs' contribution nonetheless marks a turning point for the study of gender in this field, even as the absence of women in early rural sociological research may indeed be overstated by scholars at times. Beyond bringing women into focus as critical participants in food production, whose contributions were essential to the viability of family farms but had been historically "overlooked and undervalued" (1983:xi), Sachs revealed the gendered power dynamics in the scholarship on agricultural labor. By the early 1990s, scholars in rural studies from the United States, Europe, and beyond had amassed considerable research documenting the amount and type of agricultural and household work that women performed on family farms (Flora 1985; Gasson 1980; Haney and Knowles 1988; Haugen 1990; Rosenfeld 1986; Shortall 1992; Whatmore 1991). Some of this research focused on how women perceived themselves in relation to the farm tasks they performed. For instance, Rosenfeld and Tigges (1988) concluded that, although women's labor was indispensable to the functioning of the farm, women's self-identification on the farm followed a "traditional" gender ideology, in which very few women who performed daily farm

tasks described themselves as *farmers*. As Brandth (2002) noted, research in Europe during that time found that women who farmed had trouble counting their labor as critical work to the operation (Whatmore 1991), and there was a general reluctance to use the term *farmer* in reference to women (Haugen 1985, cited by Brandth 2002).

Though still coming into its own, the scholarship on women in agriculture has become more extensive in recent years. Not only is there increasing scholarly attention placed upon women farming in other parts of the world; such as Australia (Alston 2006; Grace and Lennie 1998), Europe (Brandth and Haugen 2000; Riley 2009), and the global South (Angeles and Hill 2009; Gunewardena 2010); but there is also emerging empirical work on the various farming methods women use. Recent studies have examined women's participation in sustainable agriculture to understand motivations for involvement (e.g., Jarosz 2011) and the extent to which this type of farming gives women spaces for empowerment (e.g., Hassanein 1999; Trauger 2004).<sup>3</sup> Some of this research found that American sustainable agriculture organizations for women gave members a supportive place to exchange farming knowledge, a women-only space where personal agency can be realized, and a place where the opportunity to assert themselves as farmers is available (Hassanein 1999; Trauger 2004). Of course, "sustainable agriculture" can include a variety of approaches to farming, from large-scale production of certified organic vegetables to hand-scale "no spray" production methods. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that all types of sustainable agriculture are friendlier to women's involvement. In any case, across the United States, "women are better represented and more prominent in sustainable agricultural organizations" (Peter et al. 2000:232) than in conventional agricultural organizations. In a 2001 nationwide survey of CSA farms, women made up 36 percent of principal operators (Lass et al. 2003), and some suggest that CSA farming is more conducive to women's involvement due to its emphasis on community building and holistic food systems (DeLind and Ferguson 1999).

As Brandth (2002:181) observed, compared with earlier efforts that often relied on the static sex roles approach, more recent work in this area focuses on the gendered "meanings and practices" of farming, examining gender as constructed in

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<sup>3</sup>Quantifying sustainable versus conventional farmers in the United States is difficult. Among Wisconsin principal operators growing certified organic agricultural products in 2007, 246 were women (USDA 2011b). Since some uncertified farmers farm according to Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) standards (OMRI 2012), this figure does not accurately reflect the number of women who farm sustainably.

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everyday life, at once contingent and relational. In an excellent early piece that brings together a discussion of women farmers with shifting meanings of femininity, Brandth (1994) focused on Norwegian women who regularly used farm machinery, finding that these women were redefining femininity in their daily practices. Morris and Evans (2001), in their analysis of farm media in the United Kingdom, identified a strong current of domestically oriented femininity, but also located a shift in recent decades toward representations of multiple femininities, evident in stories about women entrepreneurs both on and off the farm. And, in interviews with principal operators on conventional Kansas crop farms, nearly all of whom were men, Beach (2013:225) found evidence of discourse pointing to “detraditionalization and diversity,” as many farmers expressed strong appreciation for a range of women’s contributions to the farm and household. Beach (2013:226) noted that although her results indicate a more flexible view of women’s identities, “it does not necessarily mean that women are being propelled into the ‘tractor seat’ on farms.” Overall, this scholarship, while limited compared with rural masculinities, points toward a shift occurring in the way women’s labor on and off the farm is viewed. A better understanding of the difficulties faced by women who farm, in both conventional and alternative agriculture contexts, and what this means for rural femininities would be a valuable addition to the study of changing rural gender relations.

## GENDER AS MULTILEVEL

A leading approach among sociologists of gender is viewing gender as multilevel. That is, the understanding that gender manifests at—and thus, ought to be analyzed within—the institutional, interactional, and symbolic levels.<sup>4</sup> These levels are interrelated and in this article I engage with each at different points. This articulation of gender as multilevel does not often occur in American rural sociology. Gender scholars focusing on the first level analyze how institutions draw gender boundaries and divisions of labor (Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 1999). Examining gender at the institutional level reveals the proportion of women versus men in an occupation. That women farmers who are principal operators constitute only 14 percent of all farmers in the United States (USDA 2011a) is an indication of gender inequality in farming at the institutional or structural level. A helpful

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<sup>4</sup>The precise levels of gender analysis may differ. Acker (1990) specified five different “gendering processes.” In most multilevel frameworks there are structural/institutional, interactional, and symbolic/cultural levels.

concept here is Connell's "gender regime," the pattern of gender relations within an institution (Connell 1987:120). In this article I aim to understand how women in farming may have interrupted the gender regime of agriculture by claiming the title of *farmer*.

The interactional level of gender analysis is dominated by West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" framework. This approach argues that gender emerges among individuals in everyday social situations. Rather than already existing as a foundation inherent to individuals before interaction, gender is thus seen as constituted, reconstituted, and policed through social interaction. Scholars have argued recently that the way some have used this framework leaves no room for identifying behaviors that challenge gender norms (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009). This article highlights how the practices of some women align with an alternative femininity that pushes the boundaries of idealized gender relations in farming.

Finally, gender is constituted at the level of symbols and images, with meanings that can reinforce or challenge gender norms (Acker 1990). These symbols are found in various arenas—television, high culture, language, dress, or ideology. Similarly, Messner (2000) describes "the level of cultural symbol," in which shared culture provides symbols that social actors draw upon when making gender distinctions.

This article focuses on the symbolic/cultural level to highlight how women's bodies are "read," or not "read," as farmers in their communities. In describing this process, I find that "legibility" is a useful concept, though not typically used in the social sciences. In my use of the concept, I borrow from scholars in the humanities who work on theorizing the body. The media theorist, Allucquere Rosanne Stone, for example, defined the "legible body" as "textually mediated physicality" within a broader discussion of technology, power, and bodies (1994:182). I use "legible" in a similar way, referring to the ways that the body is embedded with cultural symbols that in turn shape discourse. To be legible is to be socially recognized, "seen" or "read" through the body and made meaningful through language. My use of legibility also falls in line with how Butler (2000) invoked the concept to discuss discrimination and visibility. I contend that bodily differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, and race shape the use of the term *farmer*; and that in many arenas of American agriculture these differences render those who fall outside the category of white men *illegible* as farmers. This article shows how some women resist this exclusion by claiming the title of *farmer* for themselves.

## FEMININITIES

Raewyn Connell's contribution to the study of masculinities (1987, 1995) changed the course of the sociology of gender. By 2000, the search for varieties of masculinities was in full swing, in the social sciences as well as the humanities. In fact, a special issue of *Rural Sociology* was devoted to masculinities, opening the door to theorizing *rural masculinities* (Campbell and Bell 2000). The notion that there may be multiple femininities was advanced by Connell to further specify her more central focus on masculinities and the practices of men. Still, as talk of hegemonic masculinity spread with much enthusiasm among gender scholars and others interested in relations of power, the concept of *emphasized femininity* failed to gain much traction. Connell (1987:183) described this concept as a kind of femininity "defined around compliance" and "oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men." Connell (1987:183) goes on to discuss other kinds of femininity that are "defined centrally by strategies of resistance or forms of non-compliance."

Ten years after *Masculinities* (1995), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:848) took stock of this literature, encouraging scholars to investigate the concept of femininity and the "practices of women." Today, there continues to be limited scholarship on femininities, particularly how they are related to one another and to masculinities. Existing contributions in this area come from various disciplinary perspectives. Halberstam's (1998) cultural investigation of female masculinity illustrated that masculinity need not be equated with the practices of men. Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (2005) conducted research on skater girls and resistance to emphasized femininity in Vancouver, Canada; and Pyke and Johnson (2003) revealed "racialized femininities" in their study of Asian American young women in southern California. More recently, Finley (2010:360) researched roller derby players and "intragender relations" among femininities, finding evidence for "gender maneuvering" in which women drew on conventional femininity to construct alternative femininity.

Particularly helpful is Schippers' (2007) theoretical formulation of multiple femininities, which contributes to gender analysis on the symbolic/cultural level, focusing on the "quality content" of masculinities and femininities while emphasizing relationality among them (2007:90). *Hegemonic femininity*, the term that Schippers prefers to emphasized femininity because it captures hierarchical relations among femininities, complements hegemonic masculinity in that it "includes physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance" (2007:91). Schippers has identified femininities that are stigmatized and stand apart from this dominant form, such as "pariah femininities" (2007:95), which can include practices by women such as aggression or sexual acts with other women. Contrary



to hegemonic femininity, femininities such as these threaten hegemonic masculinity instead of reifying its power. Schippers (2007:91) argues that hegemonic masculinity is not at the center of gender hegemony, as Connell suggests; it is the “idealized relationship” between femininity and masculinity that is the core of gender hegemony. These idealized characteristics and this relationship are symbolically powerful and “provide a rationale for social relations at all levels of social organization” (2007:91).

There are, however, concerns with how multiple masculinities, and by extension, multiple femininities, have been used to theorize gender relations. For instance, the tendency in this literature to identify multiplicity has often, as some scholars have indicated (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), led to essentialism. References to black masculinity or gay masculinity can, for example, result in overlooking distinctions within groups of men; reducing the many gendered ways of being to a particular type based on race or sexuality (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Others have criticized femininity and masculinity theory for their binary framework, which may lead to simplistic conclusions about male bodies as masculine and female bodies as feminine (Massey 1996; Risman 2009). Yet I argue that these concepts continue to be useful tools for the study of gender relations, offering a window into the complex dynamics of those relations, particularly in times of social change. What needs more attention is the idea of multiple femininities, which currently occupies a very small place in the sociology of gender; and a better grasp on how dominant forms of masculinity and femininity act as the focal point of gender hegemony in any given place, following Schippers (2007). Yet while research on rural masculinities abounds (e.g., Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006; Kimmel and Ferber 2000), apart from the few studies mentioned earlier (see also Leyshon 2008), there is limited scholarship on rural femininities, as geographer Jo Little has observed (2002).

There is much to be gained by examining rural femininities in farming. For instance, Campbell and colleagues (2006) have argued that today’s dominant forms of masculinity draw on the symbolism of the rural man. When we closely examine the way the farmer image is produced and consumed, there is a hidden dimension to this gendered category. The farmer is painted as a lone ranger, a tough guy sweating solo in the fields and confronting extreme weather, while the contributions of women and children to the farm operation are overlooked (Campbell et al. 2006). Their work is, in a word, invisible, to use Sachs’ term (1983). If rural masculinity often keeps this labor hidden, how is gender reshaped when women take up the title of farmer? We know that more flexible forms of masculinity

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have emerged within sustainable agriculture to contest hegemonic masculinity in farming (Bell 2004; Peter et al. 2000). Yet do alternative femininities offer a similar challenge? In other words, a look at rural femininity may reveal something about gender overall. By focusing on femininities and farming, this article is thus an extension of ongoing work on shifting gender dynamics in rural places. Now a focus on femininity and its relationship to masculinity is critical because the increase in women principal operators—and perhaps the overall increasing prevalence of sustainable agriculture—may indicate that a shift toward more equal gender relations in rural areas is occurring. Whatever farming methods they use, this article seeks to understand how American women may be reshaping rural femininity in their attempts to be recognized as farmers.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

Wisconsin follows the nationwide trend of the increased prevalence of women farmers. In 2007, women made up 12 percent of all principal operators in Wisconsin compared with 3.5 percent in 1978 (U.S. Census Bureau 1979; USDA 2011b). This state makes for an interesting context in which to study women in agriculture because it has a thriving sustainable agriculture community—evident in the numerous alternative agricultural spaces, such as the biannual Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference in La Crosse, and the nearly 50 CSA (community-supported agriculture) farms in the Madison area (FairShare CSA Coalition 2014)—set against the backdrop of a farming culture dominated by medium-sized traditional semi-confinement dairy operations (Barham 2007). In 2007 only 6 percent of Wisconsin's 9,176 women principal operators ran dairy farms, compared with a total of 18 percent of all principal operators running dairy farms statewide (USDA 2011b). This difference suggests that dairy farming inhibits women's independent participation, perhaps due to its expensive inputs or other characteristics of the industry. With organic food production and CSA farms becoming more common across the United States, often in rural places with male-dominated farming networks, a look at how women farmers are faring in Wisconsin may offer insight into American women's experiences entering agriculture more generally.

Between 2006 and 2007, I conducted an ethnographic study of 12 women farmers in Wisconsin. The methods consisted of in-depth interviews and participant observation. Because I aimed to gather a rich and textured understanding of how women perceived their entrance into agriculture as farmers, and the process by which they managed difficulty, the relatively small sample size was appropriate for

collecting this kind of data. The criteria for participation were that women must have been actively involved in farming and making important day-to-day decisions on the operation. I contacted a variety of agricultural organizations and venues, and through those connections I obtained the contact information for women farmers who fit the criteria for the study. Most often, I sent introductory emails or made phone calls in which I described the objective of the project. I explained to potential participants that I was conducting a project about women farmers in Wisconsin and that I wanted to understand how women enter and stay in agriculture. I relied on snowball sampling to find additional participants.

Using the USDA categories of farm operations, nine women could be categorized as principal operators and three as secondary operators. The women in the latter group described their contribution as just under 50-50 with another operator (e.g., husband, romantic partner, and/or business partner). All farmers operated small or medium-sized farms, which I define as operations with gross annual sales of up to \$99,999 and between \$100,000 and \$249,999 respectively, drawing from economic sales class categorization from the report, Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics (USDA 2012c). Three of the women in my sample farmed using conventional methods, seven used sustainable methods, one described her approach as a combination of the two, and another described hers as “natural.” The average age of the women in this sample was 40, and nine of the women had either been raised on a farm or spent considerable time in their childhoods on farms. The farms that women operated included five vegetable farms, six dairy and/or beef farms, and one small animal farm. Regarding pathways to agriculture, three women reported that they became farmers by marrying a male farmer, and the remaining nine women made intentional occupational decisions to farm. Nine women in the sample had at least some college education. Three women had advanced degrees, and these women were all farming using sustainable methods. All of the women in the study sample were white.<sup>5</sup>

Most interviews took place at women’s farms, all of which were located in southern or central Wisconsin, within 200 miles of Madison. All participants were interviewed at least once. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to three hours, and the average interview length was 52 minutes. Interviews covered several topics, including how women began farming, their daily routines, and the division of labor

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<sup>5</sup>I was not able to locate women of color to participate in this study. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, 94 percent of women principal operators in the United States are white (USDA 2011a). I hope a future study of women farmers will focus on a racially diverse sample.

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on their farms. All interviews were digitally recorded, except one during which I took detailed notes instead, at the request of the participant.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS.

NAME	AGE	OPERATOR STATUS	OPERATION SIZE AND TYPE
Sally	46	principal operator	small farm, "organic" (not certified), lamb and chickens
Jackie	48	principal operator	small farm, certified organic, vegetable CSA
Maggie	35	principal operator	small farm, certified organic, vegetable CSA
Lisa	42	principal operator	small farm, "organic" (not certified), vegetable CSA
Becky	29	principal operator	small farm, "organic" (not certified), vegetable CSA
Sharon	45	principal operator	small farm, certified organic, vegetable CSA
Hallie	31	principal operator	medium dairy farm, "between" conventional and sustainable approach
Jocelyn	22	principal operator	small farm, conventional dairy and beef, with plans to implement intensive grazing system
Kia	24	secondary operator	medium farm, natural beef
Maya	75	principal operator	medium farm, conventional dairy
Jen	55	secondary operator	medium farm, certified organic dairy and beef
Debra	33	secondary operator	medium farm, conventional dairy

I used participant observation methods with five participants. This time amounted to an average of eight hours spent working with and observing each farmer in her daily routine. I participated in various types of work on women's farms: I fed cows, sheep, and chickens; picked strawberries; helped build a hoop house; planted potatoes; packed CSA boxes; and cleaned a barn between milkings. I also stayed after the workday, sharing meals with women, or listening to stories around a bonfire. Though the average time spent with each woman in the sample was limited, I gathered at least a partial understanding of their everyday practices. Interviews and fieldnotes were transcribed during and after the data collection

stage and data were organized by themes. Following feminist narrative analysis, I paid special attention to moments of crisis and revelation in women's stories (Riessman 1993).

## LEGIBILITY STRUGGLES: COMING UP AGAINST THE GENDER REGIME OF FARMING

### *Symbolic Barriers*

Gender regimes exist in place. To discuss *alternative* femininities or masculinities it is thus necessary to first understand the gender regime *in situ*, that is, the normative gender relations that make up any given institution. In the context of family farming in Wisconsin, the *farmer* symbolically occupies the position of hegemonic masculinity in the gender hierarchy, and the *farm wife* occupies the symbolic position of hegemonic femininity. Yet gender scholars argue that masculinities and femininities shift over time and should not be regarded as static (e.g., Connell 1987, 1995). For example, the decrease in the number of men in the United States who are farming today compared with earlier decades, the result of a broad pattern of structural consolidation and increasing nonfarm work opportunities (Hoppe and Banker 2010), may signal the overall decreasing masculinity status of this group. However, in farming, the categories of *farmer* and *farm wife* are components of a powerful gender regime; even as this idealized partnership is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in practice. This difficulty is partly due to prohibitively expensive health insurance premiums that force many rural women to obtain off-farm jobs. Nevertheless, the symbolic categories persist, reinforcing dominant forms of masculinity and femininity through social rules, taboos, and structural obstacles that stand in the way of women becoming farmers, or legible as such. Evident in women's narratives below, these barriers manifest at various levels of the gender system despite continuous and growing challenges to normative gender relations in farming. Women often managed these barriers through persistence.

When I asked how they began farming, the theme of constrained choices emerged in the stories of five women. That is, these participants described receiving the message from their families or communities that women could not be the main decision-maker on the farm, and this message shaped how women thought about their career options. To illustrate, Jackie was a 48-year-old farmer who grew organic vegetables on ten acres of land in rural Wisconsin. Her parents did not farm for a living, but her mother came from a long line of farmers. In her twenties Jackie

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went to graduate school to obtain certification in a non-agricultural occupation. Shortly thereafter, she had an epiphany about food and land use that led her to intern on multiple small farms across the United States before settling in Wisconsin and starting her own operation. As we washed the dirt from heads of lettuce in the barn, Jackie reflected upon her career aspirations as an adolescent:<sup>6</sup>

You know, I was in high school in the late seventies. It was still not a time when they were encouraging girls to go into agriculture, at least not in the state of Wisconsin where our primary agriculture is dairying. And who knew there were other options? I didn't. It's kind of funny to think about it now. Because what I thought I could be was a farmer's wife. I didn't realize I could be a farmer. Even if I married a man who was a farmer I thought I'd always be the farmer's wife.

When we spoke, Jackie had been farming for 15 years, standing at the helm of a successful operation that she owned and managed. As she described her experiences growing up, the gendered symbolic categories of the *farmer* and the *farm wife* had loomed large, shaping what was possible and accessible in terms of her future occupation.

In comparison to Jackie, Hallie, a talkative and cheery 31 year old dairy farmer, was younger and grew up with intimate knowledge of farm life, having been raised on a Wisconsin dairy farm. Hallie had recently purchased her farm, an operation with more than 200 milk cows, and identified her approach to farming as somewhere between conventional and sustainable. She was the primary operator and farmed full time with the help of a few workers while her husband was a co-owner and worked off the farm at a full-time job, contributing his part-time labor to the operation before and after work. As we sat in her kitchen talking about her background, Hallie, who went to high school in the early 1990s, described an experience similar to Jackie's:

I remember in my, oh it was a sociology class, actually, in high school. At the end we went around and our teacher had a really good way of getting you to really say what you really felt. Not just some surface values kind of answer. And it was, 'Okay what are you going to do? You're all going to go to college or you're going to go start a job but what are you really going to

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<sup>6</sup>Pseudonyms are used to refer to all participants.

do?’ And everybody went around the room and I said: I’m going to marry a dairy farmer. And it was the first time that it ever came out of my mouth. And I remember thinking, ‘I really wanna have my own damn dairy farm!’ [laughs] But that’s not easily going to happen and I think I can find one [a male farmer with a dairy farm] a little easier than *I* can, you know?

Despite her teacher’s encouragement for candidness, Hallie was constrained by cultural norms dictating appropriate occupations for women and thus, appropriate rural femininities. This was the first time that Hallie had voiced her occupational aspiration, but she was silenced by the influence of the powerful gender regime of farming and held accountable to the hegemonic rural femininity of the farm wife, the recognized social position for women. After an unsuccessful marriage to a dairy farmer in which she had no say over the operation, Hallie married Jake, a person who supported her dream of becoming a farmer.

Sally, a 46-year-old sustainable farmer, also came up against the cultural barrier that relegates women to the position of farm wife. I spoke with her in the cozy living room of her quaint farm house on a snowy winter’s day after spending time with her outside feeding the small animals she raised on the 50-acre farm where she lived by herself in rural Wisconsin. Sally held a master’s degree in a non-agricultural field of study and had been farming for ten years. Her pathway to farming began with the initial strategy of finding a farmer to settle down with to realize her dream. Sally’s story centered on a time when a friend of hers tried to set her up on a blind date with a farmer who lived a few hours away. The date did not go well and she found herself alone:

I remember being in the car in the morning and I was just crying and crying and I was like ‘I’m never going to be a farmer’s wife! I’m never going to be a farmer’s wife!’ And then I was sitting there in this parking lot in this small town just sobbing and, I finally stopped and I thought...but I could be a farmer! [laughs] And I just had this thing, you know, ‘okay, I get it, that’s not going to happen!’ I’d been thinking that that was the path that I needed to take and then I thought ‘Okay, that’s not going to happen.’ So then, what can happen? And that was a real pivotal moment for me and that was probably about eight years ago. And then when I came back from Washington my whole goal was to save money so that I could buy a farm.

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Sally's realization that she did not need a man to be a farmer was quite meaningful to her and represented a critical turning point. Once she recognized that she could step outside the social expectations of femininity to pursue her passion, she began to plan her life accordingly and searched for land to buy.

*Material Barriers*

The three inputs needed in agricultural production are land, labor, and capital. Still, those who wish to farm must also be part of knowledge networks that facilitate access to the three inputs above, networks that supply critical information about growing crops or raising animals. The USDA discrimination lawsuits discussed at the start of this article indicate the difficulties that women and minorities have faced accessing capital in agricultural enterprises. Similarly, women in this study reported stories of restricted access to necessary inputs.<sup>7</sup> One of these women was Jocelyn, a single 22-year-old farmer. Jocelyn grew up on a dairy farm and was raising beef cattle and milking cows of her own on land she had recently purchased.<sup>8</sup> While dealing with a male landowner, she felt that her status as a young single woman contributed to the landowner's hesitancy to sell her the farm. Although her youth certainly seemed to shape the interactions she had with the owner, gender was another factor that she felt explained the owner's hesitance. Jocelyn managed this dilemma through persistence, ultimately overcoming this material barrier.

Access to knowledge networks was also a challenge for some women I interviewed. Maggie, a single 35-year-old organic vegetable farmer, and Jackie, who I introduced above, encountered these barriers while apprenticing on small organic farms before starting farms of their own. Both described a gendered division of labor on these operations in which, as Jackie described, male interns were told to drive tractors whereas female interns were told to weed and bunch vegetables. Maggie revealed that among apprentices on this farm she was not alone in feeling as though being a woman precluded her from acquiring farming skills. Several

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<sup>7</sup>Labor availability was not a salient topic when talking with the women in my study. Seven farmers in my study had non-family members regularly employed on the farm, and most of these were through CSA worker shares. Few farmers described challenges related to finding and keeping labor on the farm. Similarly, access to capital was not a prominent theme in interviews. This may be due to the personal nature of finances and reluctance to discuss this issue.

<sup>8</sup>Jocelyn had a six-acre farm and was raising 20 beef cows and 15 dairy cows. Although she farmed using primarily conventional methods, she explained that once she acquires enough land, she would like to implement a rotational grazing system.



women in this study described difficulty getting this type of information, particularly from local male farmers. Sally and Lisa, both sustainable farmers, aged 46 and 42 respectively, struggled to obtain information from and negotiate feed prices with male farmers in their communities, attributing this difficulty to their gender. These material barriers, along with the difficulty of accessing land, work with cultural barriers to keep the gender regime of farming—and with it, hegemonic rural femininity and rural masculinity—intact.

Not all of the women I interviewed expressed difficulty with legibility. Kia and Maya, whose stories I describe below, came to farming through familial land transfers or inheritance and they did not express encountering barriers due to their gender. Still, for most of the participants, experiencing such barriers was a meaningful part of their pathway to farming. And some women carved out an alternative rural femininity by making themselves legible as farmers.

#### MAKING ONESELF LEGIBLE: INSISTING ON “FARMER”

In contrast to previous studies of women on family farms in the United States (e.g., Rosenfeld 1986), all of the women in this study identified themselves as farmers in their interviews. In most women’s narratives, taking on this identification involved transcending the stereotype—what we might call, the bodily myth—that all farmers must be men—big, strong, tractor-driving men. In this sense, the findings here coincide with what Trauger (2004) found in her study of Pennsylvania rural women, that is, the use of the body as a venue for resistance. This contestation extends beyond the body as well to challenge gendered ideas and assumptions, as well as the division of labor on the farm.

That many women in this study found meaning in taking on the title of *farmer* reveals something about femininity and masculinity. For them, being recognized as farmers was difficult because the title is invisible when worn by men. Contesting gendered norms, these women encountered difficulty because they, along with their communities, customers, and associates—whether urban or rural—deal with dominant forms of masculinity daily. As Campbell and colleagues (2006) have observed, rural masculinity affects us all, no matter our gender identity or our zip code. In this context, being a woman and a self-identified farmer can align with an alternative form of femininity, one that does not preserve the power of the normatively gendered category of *farmer*, and one that Connell (1987) might call a noncompliant form. Yet that form does not put it outside the gender hierarchy. The self-identified farmer femininity relates to rural masculinity, and this is evident in women’s stories below.

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Becky, 29 years old, owned a small organic vegetable farm with her partner in a rural community. They grew strawberries, tomatoes, snap peas, and other vegetables for customers in the area and sold produce at farmers' markets in urban settings. Becky realized in college that she was passionate about the environment and this led her to intern on organic farms. She met her future partner and they started a farm, which they described as a 50-50 operation. I asked Becky how she identified herself in terms of her occupation:

Farmer. Yeah, I tell my customers I'm a farmer. Because they'll be like, where's your *garden*? And I'll be like, 'Well, I'm a farmer,' or I'll usually say, my *farm* is near the town of Shady Glen.

It is possible that due to Becky's small-scale operation, and her consequently standard-sized stall at the farmers' market, customers refer to her as having a garden instead of a farm. Nevertheless, Becky told this story as an example of gender stereotypes she encounters, and she explained that this characterization of her job as a gardener depended on the customer approaching the farm stand. In any case, Becky perceived this experience in gendered terms and the way that she assertively distanced herself from being labeled as a gardener is accomplished through language. She harnessed the power of *farmer* by correcting her customers when they asked her questions at the market. In doing so, Becky also delivered a message about gender, indicating to her customers that women can be farmers, not just gardeners.

When I asked Lisa, a small-scale organic vegetable farmer, how she identified herself in the context of her work, she explained:

Just farmer... 'cause there's something about farm woman that's always been there and that, indicates, you know, the farmer's wife who's you know, she's got her role.

During our interview, Lisa further explained that the role of the *farm woman* or *farmer's wife* is often considered supportive of the farm operation but not viewed as a critical participant in food production. Her preference for the title of *farmer* exists in relation to this assumed position of the *farmer's wife*.

Similarly, Sally explained what it was like to step away from the socially expected position of the farm wife, drawing on a common bond with a female neighbor who also farms on her own:

So here in this society we're like—people like me or like Dora that has her fifty cows over the hill... If you're *not* going to be that typical farm wife type thing it seems like there *still* is opportunity. It's not like it's fully closed. It's harder... it's definitely harder.

Like Jackie, Sally was instrumental in creating spaces for women to learn the methods of farming, and particularly, organic practices. She held a leadership position in an organization consisting of women who farmed and those who wished to learn these skills. During my fieldwork, I attended an informational meeting for this organization, which drew about ten women of various ages, some of whom identified themselves as farmers and others who expressed the desire to learn in a women-only environment.

Another way that women claimed the *farmer* title was through explicitly drawing on bodily difference to show that women can get the job done if they have the right knowledge. Jackie went on to develop a training ground of sorts for women eager to be farmers. She taught women the basics of small-scale farming, which included how to change the oil in tractors and repair farm equipment. Jackie sought to create an environment where women could become farmers by learning how to draw on their bodily strength to accomplish farm tasks. For instance, she explained that while men often remove fence posts using their arm strength, women can be more effective at this task by lifting with their entire body: holding the post close; bending the knees; and doing the heavy lifting with their hips, knees, and arms. In teaching these skills, Jackie expanded the symbolic/cultural definition of farmer to include women, overcoming the body myth as she instructed them how to use their bodies to farm:

I wanted to have a place where women could learn agriculture if they wanted to, because women, we use our bodies differently. We don't—blanket statement here—but we don't tend to have as much upper body strength. Our strength is more in our hips and so we have to learn to use our bodies differently. I just think that some of that knowledge is not out there and people don't know how to use their bodies and how to move, all that stuff, and so I wanted to teach some of that.

Here Jackie draws on language of difference in order to assert sameness, in effect, expanding the term *farmer* to other kinds of bodies. In the process Jackie disseminated new forms of knowledge and built networks to spread that knowledge

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so that learning about agriculture did not mean relying on a network of “good old boys,” as Lisa described. In fact, Lisa, who grew up on a conventional crop farm, had interned on Jackie’s farm before starting her own operation. She described the critical knowledge she gained through this internship:

I feel like Jackie knew a lot about welding, engines, machinery, and so forth and was willing to teach me in a way that, hell my own dad wouldn’t even teach me, you know? Women belonged in the house, not out in the field or in the yard or in the barn. So honestly, I didn’t learn a goddamn thing from him.

For Lisa, interning with Jackie was particularly critical because of the heightened gender segregation on the farm where she was raised, an experience that was not the norm among women I interviewed who were raised on farms. In any case, although not all of the women I interviewed acquired farm skills in women-only spaces, for those who clearly had, it shaped how they thought of themselves as farmers.

The final way that women used the title of *farmer* was through emphasizing the different sets of responsibilities of today’s farmer; assigning the labor they do to, and identifying themselves with, the professional title. Sharon was a 45-year-old organic vegetable grower who farmed on 15 acres with her husband, Geoff. They ran a CSA program with hired labor and sold produce to restaurants and at farmers’ markets. Sharon’s work on the farm was concentrated on marketing, finances, and hiring; while Geoff’s work centered on planting and harvesting. She identified herself as the primary operator of the farm, making most of the long-range decisions. In our interview Sharon broke down the *farmer* by emphasizing different roles and redefining it:

I think the farmer concept is exactly that, a stereotype. Whether it’s my dad and his forty cows and 150 acres, or what Geoff and I are doing, I think farmer is really a misnomer. Because there are so many hats we need to wear. The fact that I wear a marketing hat doesn’t make it [me] any less of a farmer, than if I were sitting on the tractor planting. So when I use the word farmer, I always put it in quotes. Because the stereotypical farmer is what Geoff looks like; and I don’t look like the stereotypical farmer, but I’m as much a farmer on this operation as Geoff is.

Sharon invoked the symbolic image of the stereotypical farmer—a man sitting on a tractor planting—to insist that although she may not look the part and though she does not do the planting, she is as much of a farmer as her husband because marketing is just as important to the business. By describing this farmer “in quotes” image, Sharon identified hegemonic masculinity in farming, and disrupted its power by including herself in the *farmer* title.

Although working on a different kind of farm using a different approach, Debra, a 33-year-old dairy farmer, made a similar point to Sharon’s. Debra and her husband milked 75 cows three times a day on a conventional dairy farm in rural Wisconsin. Debra was raised on a Wisconsin beef farm and, although she initially had reservations about marrying a dairy farmer because of the increased work load, she grew to enjoy the dairy life and began milking in the barn with her husband when they married. Debra previously held an off-farm job working full time as a data analyst, but had recently quit her job to care for her infant daughter and to contribute more labor to the farm. I categorized her as a secondary operator and she credited her husband as principal operator. When I asked her how she identified her role on the farm, she challenged the stereotypical image of the *farmer* by highlighting the various duties required, particularly the importance of computer work:

I would say now that I’m not working [off-farm], I would consider myself to be, more of a farmer than anything, you know, a female farmer. Just because I am doing the book work and the taxes, and things like that, [which] still is considered to be part of the farm work, even though it’s not working outside with animals... Because you don’t think of farmers working on computers as much. And they do. They work on computers a lot more than they ever have.

Like Sharon, Debra similarly expanded the gendered cultural definition of farmer to include what she viewed as meaningful contributions to the farm. Both women expanded the stereotypical definition of farmer to include all of the less visible roles of a farmer. Along with Becky and Jackie, Sharon and Debra disrupted the gendered farmer/farm wife binary by insisting on the title of *farmer*, making themselves legible and establishing an alternative rural femininity as they did so. These women drew upon the place-based symbolism of rural masculinity to reshape femininity, pushing against the exclusivity of that symbolism to adopt the title of *farmer* for themselves.

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Not all women in the study were as adamant about the term *farmer* as the women described above. For instance, Kia, a 24-year-old “natural” beef farmer raising 70 cows was in the process of buying her grandfather’s farm when we met. Having spent a considerable amount of her childhood on her grandparents’ farm down the road from her mother’s house, Kia began taking over the operation when she learned that her grandfather was thinking of selling the farm. While her grandfather still owned all of the land, she owned half the animals, rented pasture land from her grandfather and neighbors, and did custom jobs on the side. I asked her how people in the community viewed her role on the farm, and she described that people had been nice.

Yeah, I think they know there’s really no one else on the farm to do it. And it just made sense. You know, I’m good at [it]. I’m starting to get a following. I mean, not a following but a reputation. Because people call me, you know. Like sometimes, some days my phone rings off the hook... The other day a new neighbor called me wondering if I would haul 14 of his horses. He found out I had a truck and trailer.

For Kia, identifying herself as a farmer was a non-issue. Furthermore, unlike many women I interviewed, she did not identify any gendered barriers on her pathway to becoming a farmer. Another woman in the study shared these similarities with Kia, and that was Maya, a 75-year-old widow who owned a small conventional dairy farm. Maya, who did not attend school past the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, had milked cows since she was 12 years old. After her husband died, Maya took over the farm and did the milking with her son. I asked if she called herself a farmer, and she exclaimed, “Well, I don’t know what else you’d call it!” When I asked if anyone in her community was skeptical when she took over the farm after her husband died she said, “Oh, no. I’ve been doing it my whole life. Everyone knew I could do it.” What set Kia and Maya apart from other women I interviewed is that their pathways were determined by familial farm transfers or inheritance, avenues to the title of *farmer* that could perhaps be justified in the gender regime of farming given the circumstances. Kia spent much of her childhood on her grandparents’ farm, and Maya had been milking cows for more than 60 years. These women may not be resisting the gender regime in farming. Nevertheless, their stories contribute to a picture of rural gender relations that may be increasingly open to multiple femininities.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The number of women farming in the United States keeps climbing, even as the number of farms has remained fairly steady in recent years (USDA 2011a). The findings of this study indicate that some Wisconsin women still face considerable obstacles when it comes to legibility, that is, being seen as farmers. While not all women I interviewed encountered these gendered obstacles; most of the farmers, both sustainable and conventional, shared times in which they dealt with legibility struggles at the multiple and overlapping levels of the gender system. As they encountered these barriers, women came up against the gender regime of farming, in particular, the symbolic categories of *farmer* and *farm wife*. Women often managed these obstacles through persistence; whether that meant locating spaces where they could learn farming skills, proving oneself as a farmer to community members, or finding a supportive partner. For those few who did not struggle with recognition, familial land transfers and inheritance were critical factors.

Many women made themselves legible by establishing the alternative rural femininity of the “self-identified farmer,” resisting the gendered exclusivity of the title of *farmer* and the hegemonic rural femininity of the *farm wife*. Thus, for many women in this study, the process of becoming recognizable as farmers meant drawing on the symbolic resource of language, disrupting the discursive power of *farmer* as a gendered category. This finding reinforces the argument that gender is multilevel, constructed at the symbolic level, as well as the institutional and interactional levels. As Schippers has contended (2007), symbolism has much to do with social practice. The findings of this study support this theoretical point to show that the practice of alternative femininity among farmers is informed by symbolic representations of both hegemonic rural femininity *and* masculinity. This in turn aligns with the core point in Schippers’ theoretical model—that it is the *relationship* between masculinity and femininity that lies at the center of gender hegemony.

For many women it was no easy task to be recognized and visible as farmers in a context in which farming and masculinity seemed to go hand in hand. In many respects, these findings illustrate the resilience of rural hegemonic masculinity, just as Beach (2013) found among conventional crop farmers in Kansas. While there are increasing challenges to rural hegemonic masculinity, it still holds a grip on our imaginations, our practices, and the way we see and recognize gendered ways of being.

More research is needed to understand how the increase in women farmers may be shaping rural gender relations. Future studies ought to sample from multiple

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states in the United States to understand how place may be shaping women's experiences with legibility as farmers. The construction of femininity and masculinity in rural Wisconsin may be distinct compared with other places and communities where, for example, claiming the title of farmer or rancher could be more risky. Understanding how masculinity and femininity are constituted and connected to each other in particular rural places would be helpful for identifying broader trends and possible overall shifts in power relations in non-metropolitan areas. Interviewing men who farm about their views of women principal operators, as well as ethnographic work at farmers' markets could also enhance this scholarship.

In spite of persisting research needs, the current study has contributed valuable knowledge to the literature on rural gender studies by documenting barriers that women in the United States face in pursuing farming, engaging with a multilevel gender analysis and locating multiple femininities in contemporary agricultural practices. Changing gender relations in farming are underway, and this study contributes toward deepening our understanding of what these changes may mean for rural communities.

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